The Contribution of Organizational Factors to Workplace Bullying, Emotional Abuse and Harassment

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Contents

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Abstract

This chapter reviews the available international literature on the organizational antecedents of bullying and harassment by adopting the perspective of the work environment hypothesis as the main underlying theoretical explanation. According to this hypothesis, in a poorly organized work environment, employees experience high levels of stress and frustration, which may lead them to be involved in interpersonal conflicts, with some of these conflicts spiralling and evolving into bullying situations. Thus, the work environment hypothesis conceptualizes bullying as a behavioural strain outcome triggered by negative working conditions. Research adopting this explanation has grown considerably in the last decade or so, using progressively more convincing research designs. The chapter first presents a detailed description of the work environment hypothesis. It then reviews the main results of the first exploratory surveys on the role of working conditions in bullying that have consolidated such a hypothesis and have opened the way to more systematic and robust investigations. Next, it reports the evidence linking the following specific working conditions to bullying: job demands and job resources as conceptualized and measured according to two well-known job stress models (i.e. the demand–control–support model and the job demands–resources model); leadership characteristics; organizational change and job insecurity; organizational culture and climate; reward systems; and physical working conditions. In the concluding section, the main limitations of the available research will be highlighted and, based on these, directions for future research will be proposed.

1   Introduction

Since the beginning of workplace bullying research, the hypothesis that organizational (i.e. work environmental) factors play a role in the development of bullying has been carefully considered (e.g. Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Leymann & Gustavsson, 1984, as cited in Leymann, 1996). This perspective, known as the *work environment hypothesis* of workplace bullying, is rooted in the underlying idea that organizational factors lead to the experience of work stress, with distressed employees becoming social stressors for each other and interpersonal conflicts developing as a final outcome of this process. Workplace bullying, as an extreme form of interpersonal conflict (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011) and a severe social stressor (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005), may thus be seen as a strain-related phenomenon, mainly developing in work environments where the prevalence of work stress is already high.

This chapter reviews the international literature on the organizational antecedents of bullying and adopts the theoretical framework of the work environment hypothesis. First, the details of this framework will be presented, including a discussion of the potential intervening mechanisms and processes. Next, the results of early large surveys documenting the involvement of work and environmental factors in the escalation of bullying will be reviewed. Such early surveys, by showing a recurring association of bullying with certain organizational factors, opened the way to more systematic investigations focused on the role of specific factors or configurations of factors. These accumulating investigations have revealed the importance of the following organizational antecedents of bullying: role stressors (i.e. role conflict and role ambiguity); job demands and job resources, as operationalized by the demand–control–support (DCS) model (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) and the job demands–resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004); destructive and constructive leadership styles; and organizational change and job insecurity. Thus, excluding role stressors, which are considered in a different chapter of the volume, the following four sections of this chapter will review and critique the available literature on each of these antecedents. Following these, a further section will address the potential role of additional organizational conditions that have received partial attention. Finally, some conclusions are drawn about the overall quality of the available evidence and avenues are suggested for further research.

It is important to stress that bullying is widely acknowledged to develop from multiple causes, including the personality of both the victim and the perpetrator and the attitude and behaviours of the bystanders (Einarsen, 2000; Zapf, 1999). Thus, it is reductive to overemphasize only one type of explanation (e.g. organizational factors) for the development of bullying. We refer the reader to other relevant chapters in the volume (particularly those focusing on role stressors and personality dispositions of both targets and perpetrators of bullying) to broaden the perspective on the phenomenon and gain a more articulated view of its antecedents.

2   The Work Environment Hypothesis

When explaining the occurrence of bullying, the most reported causal model (i.e. the work environment hypothesis) postulates that stressful and poorly organized work environments may give rise to conditions that may develop into bullying. Deficiencies in the design of work and flawed leaders lie at the core of this model and act as the main triggering elements of those conditions that favour bullying (e.g. Einarsen, 2000; Hoel & Salin, 2003; Salin & Hoel, 2011).

According to Leymann (1996), a series of intervening processes links a poor work environment to bullying. Adverse psychosocial conditions at work lead to physiological stress reactions, which in turn stimulate feelings of frustration. Through psychological processes such as fundamental attributional errors and displacement of aggression—occurring especially if employees lack the ability to

identify and deal with social stressors—frustrated employees can blame each other, triggering a bullying situation that impinges on one or more employees.

Later, Einarsen (2000) and others (e.g. Bowling & Beehr, 2006) further specified these intervening processes by drawing on two different theoretical approaches: aggression theory (e.g. Berkowitz, 1989) and the social interactionist perspective (Felson & Tedeschi, 1993). According to the former, frustration can give rise to aggressive inclinations and responses because it is aversive, that is, it generates negative emotions such as anger. These emotions, together with other critical internal states such as hostile cognitions (see Neuman & Baron, 2003), constitute the proximal triggers of aggression. This explanation, which has been applied in modelling counterproductive work behaviour (Fox & Spector, 2005), is particularly suitable for elucidating the behaviour of perpetrators of bullying who may engage in negative acts in response to distressing working conditions, leading to frustration and negative emotions. According to the social interactionist perspective (Felson & Tedeschi, 1993), which mainly focuses on the future victim of bullying, distressing working conditions can modify a person's behaviour, leading him or her to engage in—more or less deliberate—acts that may be perceived as provocative (e.g. reduced performance, withdrawal, violation of social norms), thereby instigating aggressive responses from others as a retaliation in kind.

In a further development of these theoretical elaborations, Baillien and colleagues (Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, & De Cuyper, 2009), based on interviews with different organizational actors witnessing the same bullying episodes, provided support to the idea that frustration, interpersonal conflicts and inefficient coping styles of victims and perpetrators may indeed be crucial intervening "ingredients" linking work environmental conditions to bullying. They suggested that, as a response to frustration and the ensuing negative emotions, some employees will actively channel frustration into negative acts towards others, thus becoming perpetrators. Other employees may resolve to cope passively by withdrawing and reducing their job commitment and performance, thus violating social norms within the group and provoking the retaliation of others and, as a result, becoming victims of bullying. A conflictual situation may arise in either circumstance, suggesting that frustration and conflict may be subsequent steps in the bullying escalation process affecting both perpetrators and victims.

Clearly, there are complex intervening processes operating in the relationship between a poor work environment and bullying, which are important to understand for preventive purposes. However, there is still no compelling evidence available to support the relevance or importance of specific intervening processes, as will become apparent in the following sections.

3   The Contribution of the First Large Surveys

In his pioneering work conducted in Sweden, Leymann (1990, 1996) brought specific examples of poor working conditions that may initiate the bullying development process, such as unclear and conflicting tasks and goals (i.e. role conflict and

ambiguity) and excessive workload. Underlying these conditions, Leymann strongly pointed out the role of the management, frequently described by victims as inadequate, uninterested or helpless, when not directly and actively involved in the bullying situation.

The first studies on the role of work environmental factors generally supported Leymann's claim. Einarsen and colleagues (1994) found that among Norwegian employees, bullying and harassment correlated significantly with several aspects of the work environment, most notably role conflict, dissatisfaction with leadership, the degree of autonomy experienced at work and role overload. Not only victims of bullying reported more negative working conditions, but so did observers of bullying, suggesting that those conditions may not be a consequence of direct exposure to bullying. Similarly, a Finnish study by Vartia (1996) found that, in workplaces where bullying was present, the general atmosphere was strained and competitive and there were fewer possibilities for collaborative discussions about tasks and goals. Additionally, there was a more authoritative way of settling differences of opinion at work and workers were more frequently living in anticipation of change (organizational changes, new working methods and notice of termination). According to Vartia, the economic depression occurring at the time of the study had led to staffing cuts and to a corresponding increase in the level of stress of the surviving employees. A similar study was conducted in Germany by Zapf, Knorz and Kulla (1996b), who confirmed a lower level of job control reported by victims of bullying.

More recently, Agervold and Mikkelsen (2004) conducted an analysis at the departmental level in a Danish manufacturing company. They found that the department with most bullying was characterized by a more authoritarian management, more uncertainty about roles and expectations and, to a lesser extent, by poorer social relations. They cautioned, however, about inferring the quality of the work environment in the unit exclusively from reports given by bullying victims, since these reports may be negatively biased as a result of the victimization process. When removing bullying victims from the analyses, only some differences remained; specifically, in the department with most cases of bullying, employees experienced higher levels of job demands (i.e. cognitive demands) and a more unsatisfactory management style. In a subsequent Danish study using a similar approach, it was shown, however, that the departments with more bullying were characterized by a poorer psychosocial work environment (i.e. higher demands and pressure, a more autocratic leadership, less clear duties and a worse social climate), independently of whether or not bullying victims were included in the analyses (Agervold, 2009). This lends support to the notion that a worse psychosocial work environment may indeed be an objective condition that engenders bullying and not only a consequence of a direct or indirect (i.e. as an observer) involvement in bullying.

Even more recently, research has started to adopt a multivariate approach in a more systematic way. The logic was to include different work environmental conditions in explanatory models of bullying and isolate the strongest predictors. For example, Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen (2007) included nine different work and organizational factors in their prediction of different measures of bullying among Norwegian employees and found that role conflict, tyrannical leadership and

interpersonal conflicts were the strongest predictors. In another Norwegian study, role conflict and interpersonal conflicts also emerged among the strongest predictors of perpetrating bullying (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2009). This indicates that the same factors that may influence victims may also affect perpetrators, suggesting that such deficiencies in the work environment (e.g. role conflict) may play a crucial role as conditions favouring the occurrence of bullying. Another large survey conducted in Belgium found again that mainly role stressors were positively related to exposure to bullying behaviours (Notelaers, De Witte, & Einarsen, 2010). Additionally, lower autonomy and feedback, higher job demands and workload, and job insecurity and changes in the job were further significant predictors.

One of the weaknesses of these first studies on the organizational antecedents of bullying was that they adopted an explorative approach whereby long lists of potential predictors were included in explanatory models without relying on any established theory. This is legitimate in the first stages of development of a new area of enquiry. However, such explorative stance should leave room for the development or application of more refined and detailed theoretical explanations for a field to advance. This requires the testing of specific hypotheses, including moderating and mediating factors, and the adoption of research designs that are better suited for causal analysis. This is exactly what has (slowly) begun to happen in bullying research during the last 10 years or so.

4   The Demand–Control–Support Model and Workplace Bullying

4.1   The Model

Job demands and their different manifestations, especially work intensity and pace of work, are prominent stressors in modern workplaces (Reid & Ramarajan, 2016). According to the demand–control (DC) model (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990), psychological job demands such as having much to do at work and having to work very fast due to close deadlines arouse the individual by activating the stress response with its biochemical mediators (including adrenaline and noradrenaline). The mobilized psychophysical energy needs to be discharged to preserve the employee's health, well-being and productivity. In those situations in which individuals do not have enough control at work (e.g. decision authority), they cannot fully and productively dissipate such mobilized energy, which will remain active within the body in the form of residual strain. Thus, high job demands, especially if coupled with low job control—a psychosocial condition called high strain or job strain—determine the experience of high stress and deteriorate the psychological well-being (see, e.g., Häusser, Mojzisch, Niesel, & Schulz-Hardt, 2010). More recently, it has become clear that low job control may act as a stressor per se, independently of the level of job demands, perhaps because it clashes with an innate individual need for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Subsequently, social support resources were also incorporated in the DC model, which was then renamed demand–control–support (DCS) model (Johnson & Hall, 1988). Social support is seen as particularly useful in conditions of high strain, with lack of support bringing about the worst work-related psychosocial scenario, called iso-strain (i.e. isolation coupled with high strain). A number of studies have adopted the DCS model to operationalize the antecedents of bullying.

4.2 The Evidence

Tuckey and colleagues employed the DCS factors to predict the frequency of Australian police officers having been the target of bullying (Tuckey, Dollard, Hosking, & Winefield, 2009). They also ran additional analyses by using the same factors to predict police officers having observed bullying. The results revealed that lower support was related to bullying for both victims and observers and higher job demands were related to bullying only for observers. Additionally, a three-way interaction which was significant for observers of bullying and close to significance for targets showed that the combination of higher demands with lower control and lower social support significantly explained bullying.

A further study conducted in Belgium employed latent class analysis to identify various target groups of bullying on the bases of the frequency and nature of the reported negative acts undergone at work (Notelaers, Baillien, De Witte, Einarsen, & Vermunt, 2012). To each of these groups, Notelaers and colleagues (2012) associated a probability of being the target of severe bullying. Four levels of job demands and job control were also differentiated: very high, high, low, very low. Then, it was estimated whether different levels and combinations of job demands and job control were related to the probability of being the target of severe bullying. It was found that very high levels of job demands and low or very low levels of job control were each associated with a significantly higher probability of being a target of severe bullying. Additionally, high or very high job demands in combination with very low job control were also associated with a strong increase in the probability of reporting severe bullying. The results supported the view that severe bullying may be a function of high job demands, low job control and their interplay, suggesting that the condition of high strain and its associated physical and psychological states (i.e. stress) may be implicated in the experience of bullying.

In a further recent study (Goodboy, Martin, Knight, & Long 2017), the authors argued that organizations that put excessive pressure on workers create a so-called boiler room environment (see also Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, & Namie, 2009), which may be a root cause of bullying. Such an environment was operationalized by Goodboy and colleagues (2017) using the DCS factors. Results of their analyses on a sample of American employees revealed that job demands positively related to bullying, while job control and social support negatively related to bullying. Additionally, a three-way interaction indicated that in a low supportive work environment, job demands showed a stronger relationship to bullying when job control was

lower. This is in line with the idea that iso-strain situations may indeed impact bullying via the experience of work-related stress.

While the above studies were all cross-sectional, a longitudinal Belgian study provided more compelling evidence that bullying may be a behavioural strain phenomenon related to the DCS model factors. By using a sample of mostly white-collar Belgian employees, Baillien, De Cuyper and De Witte (2011a) found that job demands impacted positively and job control negatively on exposure to bullying behaviours as reported 6 months later. Additionally, Baillien and colleagues also integrated the perspective of perpetrators of bullying in their analysis. They found an interaction effect of job demands and job control on perpetrating bullying, which was consistent with the job strain hypothesis: job demands had a lagged impact on the enactment of bullying, but only among individuals with lower job control.

A number of additional single- and two-wave studies have provided evidence for the usefulness of the DCS model factors for the understanding of bullying, especially from a target perspective (e.g. Rousseau, Eddleston, Patel, & Kellermanns, 2014; Salin, 2015; Spagnoli & Balducci, 2017; Spagnoli, Balducci, & Fraccaroli, 2017). Taken together, these studies support the proposition that workplace bullying is negatively affected by job-stress-inducing factors as conceptualized in the DCS model. Importantly, such results suggest quite clear avenues in terms of job design and redesign for the prevention of bullying, avenues focusing on monitoring and modulating job demands and the pressures experienced by employees, and increasing job control and social support.

5   The Job Demands–Resources Model and Workplace Bullying

5.1   The Model

A limitation of the DCS model is that it captures only a small (though critical) segment of the psychosocial factors that may have an impact on workers' well-being. To overcome such limitations, the JD-R model has been proposed (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). According to this model, job demands do not refer only to those aspects focused on by the DCS model but refer more in general to aspects of the job (e.g. workload, role conflict, role ambiguity) that require sustained effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs. Thus, job demands have the potential to activate what has been called a health impairment process that, via the frequent experience of stress, may in the longer run lead to stress-related consequences such as burnout. Job resources, on the other hand, refer to those aspects of the job (e.g. autonomy, promotion prospects, feedback) that help in achieving work goals, offsetting job demands and the associated costs and promoting personal growth and development. Such outcomes are fostered by a motivational process activated by job resources, with the experience of work engagement acting as an intervening psychological state.

It is particularly the health impairment process, activated mainly by job demands, that is implicated as far as bullying is concerned. Demanding work environments, where the prevalence of different psychosocial risks tends to be high, require individuals to spend a lot of resources in an attempt to adapt, negatively impacting cognition, emotion and behaviour and leading to those circumstances that may promote conflicts and bullying.

5.2 The Evidence

In an Italian study by Balducci, Fraccaroli and Schaufeli (2011a), it was found that a job demands factor consisting of workload and role conflict was positively related to experiencing bullying behaviours, while a job resources factor consisting of autonomy, co-worker support and salary and promotion prospects was negatively related to bullying. Additionally, in line with expectations derived from the JD-R model, job resources significantly attenuated the relationship between job demands and bullying. Interestingly, the observed relationships were not affected by the participant level of neuroticism, strengthening the idea that such relationships are not spurious (i.e. an artefact of the influence of third variables).

In a similar study conducted in Belgium by van den Broeck, Baillien and De Witte (2011), the perspective of perpetrators of bullying was also included. Overall, the results were consistent with those that emerged in Balducci, Fraccaroli and Schaufeli's (2011a) study. However, the job demands by job resources interaction did not account for additional variance explained in the outcome. As regards the perpetrators, a significant interaction was found, with job demands being more strongly related to bullying when job resources were higher. This unexpected finding suggests that under distressing working conditions, the availability of a variety of resources may facilitate resorting to aggressive behaviour to discharge the accumulated frustration, thus preserving one's own well-being (see also Krischer, Penney, & Hunter, 2010). This dark side of job resources in high-risk environments has also been observed by others (e.g. Balducci, Schaufeli, & Fraccaroli, 2011b; De Cuyper, Baillien, & De Witte, 2009; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001), suggesting that in these conditions priority should be given to attenuating job demands so as to avoid the perpetration of bullying. A further noteworthy finding of the study by van den Broeck and colleagues (2011) was that emotional exhaustion mediated the relationship between the investigated working conditions and both experiencing and enacting bullying, thus providing a first empirical evidence of those intervening processes and phenomena (e.g. psychological strain) linking a poor work environment to bullying. The cross-sectional nature of the investigation, however, makes the inferences regarding the mediating role of emotional exhaustion particularly problematic (see Taris & Kompier, 2006).

In a further small-scale two-wave study, again conducted in Belgium, job demands (workload, role conflict and job insecurity) were positively related to targets' report of bullying 1 year later, while job resources were negatively related to the same criterion (Baillien, Rodriguez-Munoz, van den Broeck, & De Witte,

2011b). No significant lagged relationship emerged between job demands and job resources and the enactment of bullying. Additionally, and most importantly, the analyses excluded reversed or reciprocal causation between job demands and job resources, on the one hand, and bullying, on the other hand. This latter result was very important as it strengthened the idea that certain working conditions indeed predate the occurrence of bullying.

Overall, the results of studies applying the JD-R model converge with those adopting the DCS model, further strengthening the idea that bullying may indeed be a behavioural outcome resulting from excessive demands and/or a lack of resources. The picture is quite clear particularly when assuming the perspective of the targets of bullying, while for perpetrators there are fewer studies available and some of them evidenced quite counter-intuitive results regarding the combination of job demands with job resources (van den Broeck , Baillien, & De Witte, 2011; see also Balducci et al., 2011), highlighting a potential dark side of job resources that deserves more research attention. Furthermore, the results suggest that job demands seem as important as (the lack of) job resources as far as bullying is concerned: both appear to have the potential to activate the health impairment process that may lead to bullying.

Pulling the DCS and JD-R studies together, it would be incorrect to define the body of knowledge produced as solid, however. There are only a few multi-wave studies, in none of which it was possible to incorporate the intervening processes postulated by the work environment hypothesis (e.g. an increase in psychological strain, a decrement of job performance, the exacerbation of interpersonal conflict). From this, it follows that a full test of the hypothesis with an appropriate research design is still lacking. Additionally, the hypothesis insists on the fact that poor working conditions are prevalent (i.e. shared) in those environments where bullying escalates and are not only experienced by victims and perpetrators. However, most of the available studies (an exception is Skogstad, Torsheim, Einarsen, & Hauge, 2011) have adopted an exclusively individual level of analysis that does not permit the sharedness of working conditions to be modelled appropriately. Multilevel studies where group/departmental membership is considered have not often been conducted in this area. Thus, although job stress models seem to be particularly promising for understanding how bullying escalates, the conclusion is that there is still much to do to fully document the impact of those factors considered by the DCS and JD-R models on the development of workplace bullying.

6   Destructive and Constructive Leadership Styles

6.1   Styles of Leadership and Workplace Bullying: Theoretical Considerations

Managers and supervisors have been hypothesized to have an important role in the development of bullying. They may be directly involved in bullying, such as those that have been described as "petty tyrants" by Ashforth (1994)—that is, leaders who are arbitrary, belittle subordinates, lack consideration and have a forcing style of

conflict resolution. Many of these behaviours, especially if persistent over time, are highly toxic for their subordinates and are most likely to be perceived as bullying. A similar style has been described by Tepper (2000) with the notion of "abusive supervision", which characterizes supervisors who engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviour until the target terminates the relationship or modifies his or her conduct.

When arguing that leadership style was central in creating the organizational context that may facilitate bullying, Leymann (1996) also pointed his attention to a different type of leadership, wherein leaders abdicate their role. This kind of leadership, which may be defined as laissez-faire leadership style, is characterized by frequent absences and lack of involvement during critical junctures; its hallmark is a general failure to take responsibility for managing (see Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). The behaviours usually shown are more passive and indirect in nature, such as being often unavailable, failing to provide a subordinate with important information or feedback, not caring about the workload experienced by the subordinates or avoiding supporting them when verbally attacked by a customer or client. Such leadership may create frustration and stress through fuelling poor working conditions characterized by problems such as role conflict and ambiguity (see Skogstad, Hetland, Glasø, & Einarsen, 2014), high workload and lack of support and feedback, which could be the triggers for interpersonal attrition and open conflict in the group (Einarsen, 1999).

Researchers in a Norwegian study demonstrated that, contrary to what one may believe, a laissez-faire leadership style is quite commonly experienced by employees (Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010). Aasland and colleagues found that 21.2% of participants in their sample reported exposure to some laissez-faire leadership behaviours quite often or more frequently during the last 6 months. Other forms of destructive leadership such as tyrannical leadership were much less prevalent (3.4%). Additionally, it was also shown that laissez-faire leadership may exist in isolation or it may occur in combination with other forms of destructive leadership.

6.2   The Evidence

A study based on a large and representative sample of the Norwegian workforce lent support to the hypothesis that a laissez-faire leadership style may lead to bullying through the mediation of role stressors and interpersonal conflict with co-workers (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007a). However, a direct relationship between laissez-faire leadership and bullying also emerged, which was compatible with a partial mediation model. Skogstad and colleagues concluded that employees may experience a laissez-faire leadership style as systematic neglect and even as rejection and expulsion, which are central characteristics of bullying at work and may explain the direct link between this kind of leadership and the experience of bullying.

In a study of British employees from a variety of organizations, the authors investigated the relationship of different leadership styles and both experienced

and observed bullying (Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2010). Non-contingent punishment (NCP)—a leadership style where the behaviour of the leader is unpredictable and punishment is decided on the leader's own terms, independent of the behaviour of subordinates—was the strongest predictor of experiencing bullying, followed by the laissez-faire style. As for observing bullying, autocratic leadership was the strongest predictor. This suggested that not only targets but also observers of bullying tend to report deficiencies at the leadership level.

A further study was carried out by Nielsen (2013) who examined transformational and authentic leadership in addition to laissez-faire leadership style. Transformational leadership characterizes those leaders that identify the need for change, create a vision to guide the change through inspiration and execute the change with the commitment of the members of the group, creating an environment and a work culture that foster change and growth (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Authentic leadership is a relationship-focused style characterized by self-awareness, honesty and transparency, behavioural integrity and consistency. Authentic leaders show a sense of genuine caring for their subordinates and promote an open and honest dialogue with them (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009).

The results of the study by Nielsen (2013), involving a sample of seafarers in Norway, showed that laissez-faire leadership was a risk factor for different measures of bullying: being the target of bullying behaviours, self-labelling oneself as bullied according to a given definition and self-labelling oneself as perpetrator of bullying. Transformational and authentic leadership were both protective factors, but only when it came to being the target of bullying behaviours. Nielsen also found support for the role of two possible mediators—group cohesion and safety perceptions—both of which were relevant aspects of the participants' work environment. His hypothesis was that these two mediators could act as proximal protective factors against bullying, since both could reduce tension and attrition in the work group, thus deactivating aggression.

The role of authentic leadership was also investigated in a Canadian study by Laschinger and Fida (2014) on newly graduated nurses. The authors found that authentic leadership was negatively related to the experience of bullying behaviour 1 year later. Unfortunately, the authors failed to control for the baseline level of bullying, which prevented them from drawing firm conclusions about the causality of the observed relationship.

More robust evidence on the role of leadership was provided by Francioli and colleagues, who carried out a two-wave study on a large sample of Danish employees (Francioli et al., 2015a). They used a measure of quality of leadership, reflecting the capacity of the immediate superior to ensure good development opportunities and promoting job satisfaction among the supervised employees, as well as his or her effectiveness in planning work and solving conflicts. Francioli et al. (2015a) hypothesized that a leader being poor at displaying such behaviours would frustrate important needs of employees. This, in turn, would contribute to weakening the sense of community in the group, defined as the extent to which employees feel part of a community at their workplace and experience a positive atmosphere and cooperation between co-workers. Such a decrease in the sense of community would

be accompanied by the development of a tendency to treat others in a more harsh and aggressive way, increasing the risk of employees being exposed to bullying. The results of the analysis provided support for a full mediation of sense of community in the leadership–bullying relationship.

Overall, the above studies support the conclusion that poor leadership co-occurs with workplace bullying, most probably predating it and contributing to its development. This corroborates established evidence that leaders play a central role in building a good psychosocial work environment through their influence on employees' stress and well-being (Skakon, Nielsen, Borg, & Guzman, 2010).

The quality of the empirical evidence available on the link between leadership and bullying is not robust, however. Although it is obvious that a petty tyrant leader may be a cause of bullying, as yet the widespread idea that an abdicating or laissez-faire leadership style may also be an antecedent of bullying, either directly or indirectly, has not been convincingly demonstrated. Indeed, there are no studies in which a measure of leadership style that does not rely on employees as informants (e.g. a measure taken from the leaders themselves or from senior management) has been linked with employees' reports of bullying. Similarly, the sharedness of employees' perceptions of the leader has rarely been considered while designing research on this topic. Finally, the direct or indirect impact of leadership on bullying has been investigated almost always in studies that have been inadequately designed to enable causal inferences to be drawn. Therefore, there is a need of further research, taking all these shortcomings into account, to build a stronger case for the crucial role played by leaders and their behaviours in the development of bullying.

7 Organizational Change and Job Insecurity

7.1 How Organizational Change and Job Insecurity May Promote Workplace Bullying

Organizational changes such as restructuring, downsizing and other types of crises that alter the status quo are very frequent occurrences in modern workplaces (e.g. Eurofound, 2015) and have been considered important triggers of bullying (see Salin, 2003). A number of studies have shown that organizational change is significantly associated with employees' strain and tension (see Bamberger et al., 2012), probably because most change initiatives do not achieve the anticipated goals and objectives, that is, they are not successful (Nohria & Beer, 2000). Thus, organizational change may give a significant impulse to those conditions and processes that are thought to be involved in bullying. Indeed, it has been reported that certain forms of change such as cost cutting, restructuring and reengineering are significantly related to the manifestation of aggressiveness and obstructionism in employees via the development of distrustful cognitions and feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness (see Salin (2003) for a review).

Organizational change is, furthermore, often accompanied by the emergence of job insecurity, that is, the concern an employee has regarding the continued existence

of the job in the future (Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002). Downsizing and restructuring by larger private and public sector employers have both facilitated the growth of more flexible and precarious employment arrangements and contributed to increased perceived job insecurity even among those workers who have "survived" the organizational change. Job insecurity is a prominent stressor in modern workplaces (see Eurofound, 2016), especially as a consequence of the recent economic crisis. Hoel and Cooper (2000) argued that employees experiencing high job insecurity will be less prone to defend themselves against unfair and aggressive acts from supervisors and co-workers, thus being at higher risk of experiencing bullying. De Cuyper and colleagues (2009) suggested that job insecurity promotes a strained climate when employees see colleagues as potential rivals for jobs. This may cause feelings of competition, suspicion and deep frustration, factors that are known to be associated with workplace bullying (Salin & Hoel, 2011).

7.2   The Evidence

The first explorative studies on bullying (e.g. Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Vartia, 1996) confirmed the existence of bivariate associations between organizational change and bullying. A national survey conducted in Ireland, for example, found that among bullying victims, 27% reported that a change in management coincided with the onset of bullying, followed by 21% reporting that a change in the nature of the job co-occurred with the beginning of bullying (O'Moore, Lynch, & Daéid, 2003).

In a further study conducted in Norway, Skogstad, Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007b) investigated 13 different kinds of change which were grouped into three categories: change in the work environment (e.g. equipment and tools, new managers, composition of the workforce), personnel and salary reductions (e.g. layoffs, budget cuts) and restructuring (e.g. new owners, mergers, division of departments). They found that particularly change in the work environment was related to bullying, showing a stronger relationship with work-related bullying rather than with person-related bullying. Subsequently, Skogstad and colleagues derived single latent factors for bullying and organizational change and investigated whether the relationship between the two was mediated by conflicts with the immediate superior and conflicts with co-workers, which would be in line with the central idea of the work environment hypothesis. However, the hypothesized mediation was not supported. Rather, the results suggested that organizational change and interpersonal conflicts (especially conflicts with the immediate superior) were independent predictors of bullying.

A study by Baillien and De Witte (2009) on Belgian employees hypothesized that organizational change affects bullying via a significant deterioration in the work environment, including the development of job insecurity. In other words, it was anticipated that increased exposure to a range of stressors following organizational change would lead to the experience of bullying. Organizational change was operationalized as employees having experienced at least one of the investigated changes during the last 2 years (i.e. merger, restructuring, downsizing, changes at the

top, etc.) and being currently at the beginning or in the middle of the change process. The results showed that organizational change was related to exposure to bullying and that this relationship was fully mediated by role conflict and job insecurity. The small size of the relationship, however, led Baillien and De Witte (2009) to question the idea that organizational change may be an important trigger of bullying. However, the dichotomous nature of the change variable used in the study could have led to its low predictive weight, as the authors also acknowledged.

A further study supported the idea that organizational change can lead to bullying via a deterioration of the work environment and that job insecurity may play a role in this (Spagnoli & Balducci, 2017). In a sample consisting of Italian employees who recently experienced an organizational change process, it was found that job insecurity was not directly related to bullying but strengthened the workload–bullying relationship, suggesting that stressors induced by organizational change may interact in the development of bullying.

A study by De Cuyper and colleagues (2009) focusing on the role of job insecurity further confirmed a significant association between job insecurity and being the target of bullying. Additionally, job insecurity was also related to the enactment of bullying, with perceived employability—workers' perception of the likelihood of finding a new job (see Berntson & Marklund, 2007)—acting as a moderator: when perceived employability was high, there was a stronger relationship between job insecurity and the enactment of bullying. Again, this points to a "dark side" of employability, which may result in behaving aggressively towards others (see also van den Broeck, Baillien and De Witte (2011) for similar results).

Some more recent studies have used more robust designs. Oxenstierna and colleagues investigated whether baseline working conditions affected the incidence of bullying 2 years later in a sample of Swedish employees (Oxenstierna, Elofsson, Gjerde, Magnuson Hanson, & Theorell, 2012). Bullying was measured using a self-labelling approach, while organizational change was identified using a two-item scale investigating change of the work group and change of the superior. Results of multivariate analyses showed that such a simple measure of change predicted the incidence of bullying in both men and women, providing very compelling evidence that change may indeed be an independent risk factor for the subjective experience of bullying.

Holten and colleagues (2017) differentiated between task-related change (e.g. equipment and tools) and relational change (e.g. new persons in managerial positions) and investigated among Danish employees whether these two facets of change predicted bullying (Holten et al., 2017). They found that task-related change predicted being the target of bullying, while relational change predicted enacting bullying. They concluded that, overall, organizational change does contribute directly to the occurrence of bullying.

A recent two-wave study by Spagnoli and colleagues (2017) focused on a sample of Italian employees affected by a deep organizational change between two surveys with a time lag of 3 years. The researchers proposed that inadequate working conditions (i.e. high workload) would lead to the experience of bullying through psychological strain and that organizational change would act as a moderator of this process. The idea was that psychological strain resulting from poor working

conditions predating the organizational change would be increased by the incidence of organizational change, leading to a higher risk of becoming a target of bullying. Participants involved in organizational change were those undergoing at least one of the following: supervisor change, role change, workplace change or team change. Results indeed showed that the initial workload affected later bullying via psychological strain, but only among those participants who were involved in organizational change between the two surveys. Although the research design was not robust for investigating a mediating process, the study does provide a further interesting example on how risky working conditions (i.e. high workload and organizational change) may interact together in leading to bullying.

The link between organizational change and bullying may also be of a more direct nature. For example, in certain types of change such as layoffs, bullying behaviour may be used by managers to force an employee to "spontaneously" resign, suggesting that bullying may be a strategy for implementing the desired change. A qualitative study conducted on Indian information technology professionals by D'Cruz and colleagues documented this (D'Cruz, Noronha, & Beale, 2014). These authors found that participants described their layoff meeting as unexpected and profoundly abusive, with managers at the meeting behaving in aggressive and autocratic ways, yelling and taunting, forcing and threatening, and insulting and silencing participants. Participants perceived the received treatment as bullying and repeatedly used the terms bullying, abuse and harassment to describe their experience.

Thus, organizational change may be a specific event with deep implications as far as bullying is concerned, with the evidence available pointing strongly in this direction. There are a number of multi-wave studies (e.g. Spagnoli, Balducci, & Fraccaroli, 2017) and even a large-scale epidemiological study investigating the incidence of bullying in relation to the experienced change (Oxenstierna et al., 2012). It seems that organizational change may either lead to bullying directly or may impact bullying via a deterioration of the work environment. In the latter case, further research with more robust designs is needed to document the intervening role of the deteriorating psychosocial work environment. In both cases, future studies should also attempt to demonstrate more convincingly the intervening individual (i.e. psychological strain) and interpersonal (i.e. conflict) factors involved. Nonetheless, it is established that organizations implementing change processes should pay careful attention to the emergence of bullying situations and be ready to act appropriately with preventive actions.

8   Further Factors That May Be Implicated in the Development of Workplace Bullying

8.1   Organizational Culture and Climate

According to Quick and colleagues, "culture reflects norms, values, benefits, communication, quality of life, and the way in which people are developed, nurtured and rewarded" (Quick, Wright, Adkins, Nelson, & Quick, 2013, p. 38). Organizational

culture may be particularly important for bullying, because it may condone it or even encourage and reward it as a way of getting things done. In other words, "for harassment to occur, the harassment elements must exist within a culture that permits and rewards harassment" (Brodsky, 1976, p. 83; cited in Hoel & Salin, 2003, p. 212). The adoption of certain leadership styles that have been found to be strongly related to bullying (e.g. autocratic leadership style) may thus reflect an organizational culture where harassing others is implicitly considered as part of the management repertoire (see Frost, 2003).

However, although the notion of culture has been often used by bullying researchers (e.g. Salin & Hoel, 2011; Samnani & Singh, 2012), it has been very difficult to operationalize it empirically, especially in studies adopting a quantitative approach. Thus, some have relied on the construct of climate, generally defined as shared perceptions of employees regarding specific organizational issues (e.g. safety).

For example, Spector and colleagues (Spector, Coulter, Stockwell, & Matz, 2007) developed and validated the construct of violence climate and argued that employees will perceive an anti-violence climate if the management shows concern about controlling and eliminating violence and verbal aggression. This is achieved by specific actions such as a clear communication at all organizational levels that such phenomena are unacceptable in the workplace, the development of specific organizational policies dealing with them and role modelling by supervisors on good ways for conducting interpersonal interactions. Additionally, an anti-violence climate may also bring the attention of employees on recognizing the immediate antecedents of aggression and violence and on how to behave in ways that will avoid the escalation of interpersonal conflict. Spector and colleagues (2007) found among American employees that anti-violence climate was significantly and negatively related to verbal aggression, violence, injury and perceived danger.

In Bulutlar and Oz's (2009) study, ethical climate was used to predict bullying among Turkish employees. Ethical climate is a multidimensional construct referring to prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practices and procedures dealing with ethical issues. Such a climate is believed to affect decision-making and subsequent behaviour of employees in response to ethical dilemmas and issues experienced in organizational life (Cullen, Victor, & Stephens, 1989). The results of the study showed that an "instrumental" ethical climate—a type of climate where egoism and self-interest strongly guide behaviour, even at the cost of being detrimental to others—significantly and positively predicted different forms of bullying (Bulutlar & Oz, 2009).

Such studies overall suggest that certain organizational climates may act as fertile ground for the development of bullying. Unfortunately, the construct of climate was operationalized only at the individual level rather than at the team/group level by aggregating the individual perceptions, which would have been a more ecologically appropriate operationalization of the construct. Thus, there is much room for improvement in future studies. In particular, future studies may test if organizational climate becomes particularly salient when distressing working conditions are prevalent, thus acting as a moderator in the chain of interactions leading to bullying.

8.2   Reward Systems

A further aspect that has received attention in connection to bullying is the reward system adopted by the organization, which is strictly associated with culture and may represent one of its manifestations (see Quick, Wright, Adkins, Nelson, & Quick, 2013). According to Salin (2003), when promotion systems exist which reward employees that manipulate or harm other employees, such practices will promote bullying. Similarly, systems in which the performance assessment is based on ranking methods where employees are compared against each other may trigger a strong competition, with the adoption of bullying behaviour as a way to gain a competitive advantage over colleagues. In this line of reasoning, Samnani and Singh (2012) further argued that adopting "zero-sum" pay systems creates "have" and "have-not" employees. The side effect of such practices may be high competition, envy and more in general a "toxic" social environment accompanied by high levels of stress. This is also fertile ground for bullying.

However, empirical evidence on the role of the reward system is very limited. A study conducted by Salin (2015) in Finland revealed that performance-based pay reduced the risk of bullying and harassment, a result opposite to the formulated hypothesis. However, in this study, performance-based pay systems were investigated by means of a very simple yes/no question. It could be that the majority of respondents had experienced systems that strongly reward contextual performance aspects (e.g. helping colleagues in difficulties), with this explaining the protective role that performance-based pay had in this study. Thus, there is a need for more research that looks into a larger array of aspects making up the reward system adopted by organizations.

8.3   Physical Working Conditions

The physical work environment has a great potential to affect employees. Traditionally, it has been considered especially relevant for blue-collar employees or for employees working in hazardous contexts (e.g. offshore platforms) or situations (e.g. military deployment in war zones). However, all types of work take place in an environmental setting that may pose threats or benefits to individuals and their performance (Quick, Wright, Adkins, Nelson, & Quick, 2013). Factors such as temperature, light, atmospheric conditions, toxins and pollutants, personal and collective space design and layout, and equipment, tools and technology have important implications not only for occupational safety but also for the experience of stress and negative affect (Quick, Wright, Adkins, Nelson, & Quick, 2013). All these factors are well known for their potential to trigger aggressive responses (e.g. Neuman & Baron, 2003). Thus, they may be involved also in the development of bullying.

A qualitative study conducted in Belgium based on 126 semi-structured interviews (Baillien, Neyens, & De Witte, 2008) found that unpleasant and irritating working conditions such as high temperatures and crowded spaces were both

mentioned as causes of bullying. A further study based on a large Finnish data set (Salin, 2015) found that an index reflecting how much the participant was bothered by a number of possible nuisances in the workplace (e.g. heat, cold, poor ventilation, cramped spaces, heavy lifting) was a significant risk factor for being the target of bullying for both men and women. However, in the study by Oxenstierna et al. (2012), physical demands were not related to the incidence of bullying. It must be noted that in this study, physical demands were only defined by two aspects (heavy lifting and physical effort), possibly suggesting that the physical work environment was only partially characterized. Physical working conditions as potential antecedents of bullying are therefore worthy of further research investigations.

9   Final Considerations and Future Research Directions

Research on the organizational antecedents of bullying has advanced a lot during the last decade or so, with scholars paying systematic attention to several work environmental conditions that may trigger bullying, adopting progressively more sophisticated research designs including both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The theoretical model guiding this research has been mainly the work environment hypothesis of bullying, according to which bullying is a behavioural strain outcome triggered by negative working conditions via a range of intervening intrapersonal and interpersonal phenomena, including frustration, negative affect and open frictions and conflicts with co-workers and superiors.

The review of the available international literature presented above has focused on those work environmental models and factors that have received most attention, namely, the DCS model, the JD-R model, leadership styles, and organizational change and job insecurity. Further factors have also been considered, that is, organizational climate and culture, reward systems and physical working conditions. The latter factors, although fitting well within the framework of the work environment hypothesis as antecedents of bullying, have, however, only received sporadic attention.

One of the most important limitations that affects research on all the factors examined, and that drastically decreases the robustness of the findings, is the over-reliance on cross-sectional, self-reported research designs. Of all the reviewed studies, all were self-reported and only six adopted a multi-wave design and controlled for the baseline level of bullying. This is a very important weakness, which exposes the work environment hypothesis to a significant validity threat. This has to do with the fact that job strain and poor health, which are thought to be antecedents of bullying, are also well-established outcomes of bullying (e.g. Nielsen, Hetland, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2012). Additionally, it is well known that strain and poor health significantly affect perceptions of working conditions (De Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, & Bongers, 2004). There is also longitudinal evidence that bullying determines poor working conditions (role stress) rather than the reverse, which is not consistent with the work environment hypothesis (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2011). Thus, to further validate such an overall framework

of bullying development, it is of paramount importance to more carefully scrutinize the causal nature of the link between working conditions and bullying, an issue that cannot be dealt with by using cross-sectional studies.

It is also important to consider that a thorough and complete test of the work environment hypothesis would require at least a three-wave study design, since it has to be demonstrated that poor working conditions deteriorate well-being, with this leading to alterations of behaviour (e.g. withdrawal, violation of social norms) promoting interpersonal conflicts and ultimately to becoming a target of bullying. Studies that addressed such a complex causal chain have yet to be conducted. Thus, the overall conclusion is that there is a pressing need for more longitudinal investigations in this area.

Related to this, previous multi-wave studies have adopted very different time lags, such as 6 months (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011a), 1 year (Balducci, Cecchin, & Fraccaroli, 2012), 2 years (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2011) or even more (Spagnoli, Balducci, & Fraccaroli, 2017). This reveals that the temporal dimension of the process of bullying development is poorly understood and that there is a need for more conceptual and empirical work on this. An avenue for future research could be the adoption of intra-individual study designs in which the trajectory of exposure to bullying is monitored over time by using repeated and shorter (e.g. monthly) follow-ups. Such a strategy could better reveal escalation processes of negative behaviours, when these are construed as bullying by victims, and whether and which working conditions predict such evolution across time, including possible intervening processes. Even the study of de-escalation processes of negative behaviours could be used for a better understanding of the dynamic leading to bullying.

A further issue to consider is that in multi-wave studies, the net predictive power of working conditions on bullying is quite low, with a percentage of explained variance in the order of 2–3% (e.g. Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011a). This is to be expected since bullying, like most psychosocial factors, is a complex and multicausal phenomenon (see Zapf, Dormann, & Frese, 1996a). However, there is substantial room for improving such predictions, and a way to do this is a more systematic investigation of main and interacting effects between different working conditions and between working conditions and personality dispositions (see Balducci, Fraccaroli, & Schaufeli, 2011a; Francioli et al., 2015b). The inclusion of interactions in the prediction of bullying has been mainly limited to exploring the buffering effect of different kinds of job resources, such as job control and social support. However, a poor work environment is usually an environment where employees are exposed to a variety of negative working conditions that may reinforce each other and may produce stress-related outcomes of varying intensity, also in relation to the personal dispositions of employees (see, e.g., Warr, 2007). Thus, future research on the development of bullying could try to test more integrated models of bullying escalation, where such complexities are taken into consideration.

All these methodological advancements would certainly contribute to refining our understanding of bullying development. Despite such room for improvement,

however, from the research reviewed in this chapter, it seems quite clear that, in addition to role stressors covered in another chapter of this volume, destructive leadership styles and chronically high levels of job demands (i.e. workload) are both factors causally involved in the experience of bullying, especially from a target perspective. Similarly, evidence is rather convincing regarding the risk associated with organizational change processes and how they are handled. Such results may be worrying in relation to bullying prevention, given the high prevalence of poor leadership styles (Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010), the substantial intensification of work leading to high workloads (see Reid & Ramarajan, 2016) and the frequent and rapid changes affecting modern organizations, including new processes or technologies, restructuring and reorganization (Eurofound & European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2014). However, such results suggest that there is hope for effective prevention of workplace bullying, prevention that could be based on strengthening good leadership styles, reducing exposure to high levels of workload and monitoring closely the experience of employees during organizational change interventions.

10   Cross-References

▶ New Directions in Reciprocal Influences: The Case of Role Stressor–Workplace Bullying Linkages
▶ The Role and Impact of Leaders on Workplace Bullying, Emotional Abuse and Harassment
▶ The Role of Personality in Workplace Bullying Research

11   Cross-References to Other Volumes

▶ Culture and Workplace Bullying: An Overview, Vol. 3
▶ Work and Organizational Design: Influence on Workplace Bullying, Vol. 3

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